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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000584

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SUBJECT: THE ANTI-BUSH "SHADOW TOUR": CHAVEZ ON THE
DEFENSIVE

REF: A. CARACAS 000044

- [1](#)B. BUENOS AIRES 000465
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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1. 4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. President Chavez visited Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Jamaica March 8-13 in an obvious, but in our view unsuccessful, effort to upstage the President's March 8-14 visit to Latin America (Refs B-D). Upon his return to Venezuela, an unusually defensive Chavez appeared on a special television broadcast to boast that he delivered a "knock-out" against the President and to complain about the scant, and often critical, coverage the international media gave to Chavez' "shadow tour." While Chavez is not losing support among his fervent supporters with his regional pretensions, the opposition appears to be finding a receptive audience by questioning the value of Chavez' foreign aid initiatives. Chavez had predicted that huge demonstrations would "repudiate" the President's visit to Latin America, but no such extraordinary protests materialized, not even in Venezuela. While Chavez did not appear to do significant damage to himself at home or abroad, he does appear to have diluted his own media and political appeal by virtue of his own mistakes during his latest foreign adventure. End Summary.

The Chavez "Shadow Tour"

[1](#)2. (SBU) President Chavez returned to Caracas March 13 after shadowing President Bush's March 8-14 visit and declared that he had delivered a "knock-out" against the President. Chavez visited Argentina March 8-10, Bolivia March 10-11, Nicaragua March 11-12, Haiti on March 12 and Jamaica on March 13. With the exception of his trip to Argentina, which he mentioned several days in advance, Chavez announced each leg of his trip only days before arriving, and most appeared fairly haphazardly organized. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan president continues to insist publicly that the fact that he was in the Southern Cone, the Andean region, and Central America at the same time the President visited Uruguay, Colombia, and Guatemala was "pure coincidence." While extended foreign tours are nothing new for Chavez, his

defensiveness regarding his latest Latin American tour is.

"I Was Working"

¶3. (SBU) Chavez defended his trip during a special March 13 television broadcast of "Alo, Presidente" (his daily broadcast is usually only televised on Thursdays). He insisted that his March 8-13 visits in the hemisphere were part of his ongoing efforts to promote regional integration and that the President's trip to the region was the real "shadow tour". In an apparent effort to counter criticism of the cost of his foreign travels, Chavez told his viewers that he was working "for the best interests of the country" and not engaged in tourism or "wasting time." He asserted that while the President was met by protests (including ones the BRV helped orchestrate), he was warmly received on his stops.

¶4. (SBU) During the same broadcast, Chavez dwelled on what he asserted was USG manipulation of international news channels (sic) to give his own Latin American tour scant coverage, especially the second half of his tour to Nicaragua, Haiti, and Jamaica. He accused "right wing" media of mischaracterizing him as a "showman" and blasted CNN and other news stations for saying the President is more popular in Latin America than Chavez. He deconstructed critical op-eds by former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castaneda and Andres Oppenheimer line by line. In contrast, the BRV required local television stations to cover Chavez' March 9 speech to an anti-Bush rally in Buenos Aires live for the entire two hours he spoke and pro-government media outlets gave Chavez' tour prominent, daily coverage.

¶5. (SBU) Chavez also made his recent Latin American tour the focus of his March 14 "Alo, Presidente" radio broadcast, indulging in a lengthy diatribe against the governing "elite" and "mafia" of the United States. He complained that the

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President declined to mention him by name during recent press conferences and insisted that U.S. efforts to "contain" him were the central theme of the President's Latin American visit (sic). The Venezuelan president noted with satisfaction that Barbara Walters had interviewed him earlier in the day and said he told her that his dispute with the President is not "personal," but based on political differences.

The Chavez Show Underwhelms

¶6. (SBU) Local perceptions of Chavez' trip are largely a reflection of peoples' attitudes toward his government: Chavez supporters parrot the Venezuelan president's pronouncement that the trip was a success while members of the opposition view the trip, as one professor puts it, to have been the latest example of Chavez' "messianic overreach." The trip has given the opposition ammunition to point out that Chavez:

-- did not have as much "face time" with other Latin American presidents (Kirchner's non-attendance at the March 9 anti-Bush rally is much commented upon);

-- appeared to be chasing the President around the hemisphere, letting the President, in effect, set Chavez' agenda;

-- did not attract the crowds that Chavez had drawn in previous tours or generate "rock star" fervor.

In addition, the local media gave prominent coverage to Chavez' condemnation of ethanol as an alternative energy source, as well as Chavez' promise to "talk to Lula" about

this issue. Chavez' ongoing attacks on ethanol as taking away food from people to feed luxury cars is becoming a very public difference between the BRV and the Brazilian government (Embassy will address the BRV's rather confused views on ethanol septel).

17. (C) Venezuela's opposition is also capitalizing on the many aid promises Chavez made during his tour (Ref E), contrasting the large sums Chavez has pledged with the pressing, unaddressed social needs at home. The local media reported in detail on the accumulating commitments Chavez is making to other Latin American countries. On the road, Chavez continues to try to build a case that the BRV is a more generous aid donor in the region than the USG. In Venezuela, Chavez tends to describe such programs only in broad terms, highlighting the BRV's commitment to regional integration, social solidarity, and the BRV's opposition to existing international financial institutions and the USG. Primero Justicia and other opposition leaders commented to the media that it is "absurd" for the BRV to criticize the country with which it has its most important economic relationship.

Size Matters

18. (SBU) Prior to departing on his trip, Chavez had predicted that the President would be met with large demonstrations of "repudiation." He continues to insist that large crowds rejected the President's visit, but the Venezuelans we have spoken to are, by and large, unimpressed by the anti-Bush rallies in the region, including the ones attended by Chavez. Moreover, while Chavez was on the road, anti-Bush demonstrations and a downtown Caracas rally in Venezuela fizzled. The March 11 "Bush Out of Latin America" march on the Embassy attracted the participation of only around 50 people (fewer than the local police on hand). A follow-up March 12 effort attracted only four lonely Chavistas.

Comment

19. (C) By dint of his deep pockets (and willingness to make ever more promises), Chavez strengthened ties somewhat with Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Jamaica (Refs B-E). He also continued to posture himself as a regional (albeit self-appointed) leader. But by the high standards he set for himself before departing for Argentina (Ref A), Chavez'

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latest Latin American tour, compared to previous trips, was a relative flop. While Chavez managed to persuade other Latin American countries to give him an international platform to rail against the President's March 8-14 visit to the region, he did not succeed in stealing international media attention away from the President, and he had difficulty attracting the crowds that he would have hoped for.

10 (C) Moreover, the media attention Chavez did generate focused renewed scrutiny of his authoritarian showmanship. Chavez noted publicly that former Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel wrote him to urge him to task the BRV's embassies to go on a diplomatic (read propaganda) offensive. Chavez had also predicted that anti-Bush demonstrations would resemble the violent protests that then Vice-President Nixon faced during his 1958 visit to Venezuela, but no such ugly incidents materialized, not even in Venezuela. While we expect Chavez will continue to be able to buy friends and influence partners, his own outsized ego, excessive ambition, and poor delivery on promises are likely to continue to hinder his efforts to lead an anti-American coalition.

WHITAKER